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MEMORANDUM FOR WWR

Are We Pushing Hard Enough in South Vietnam ?

Nolting's cable, despite some optimism, is basically disturbing. While it may simply be too early to tell, we do not yet have things turned around in Vietnam. In part this reflects one of the real problems for any government--how to get adequate follow-through. We whack up a big exercise on a crash problem, take some strong initiatives, and then the agencies tend to slip back toward business as usual with only the White House providing much of a prod.

But more important, there are some strong political reasons for stepping up the momentum in South Vietnam. I believe it very important that this government have a major anti-Communist victory to its credit in the six months before the Berlin crisis is likely to get really hot. Few things would be better calculated to show Moscow and Peiping that we mean business than an obvious (if not yet definitive) turnaround in Vietnam. Moreover, here the odds are still in our favor, which makes Vietnam a better place than Laos to achieve the desired result.

Such a victory is also indispensable to the process of reassuring our Far East allies, most of whom have been led by Laos to wonder whether we have the moxie to protect them any longer.

What should we do? How about the President directing that all wraps are off in the counter-guerilla operations, etc. in South Vietnam? We will fund and pay for any crash measures, however wasteful, which will produce quick results. We will do anything needed in sending arms and ammunition, providing MAAG advisers, and in associated social and economic operations designed to win back the countryside. The objective--to achieve before the end of the year a major defeat of the Viet Cong.

The important thing would be a change in operational philosophy. Instead of haggling with Diem over who should finance what proportion of the effort, we would regard this as a wartime situation in which the sky's the limit. The only caveat would be that outlays must be related to the counter-guerilla campaign. Hence, we would not give Diem a blank check on economic development or on building up the regular army for defense of the 17th parallel as McGarr would have us do).

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What would it cost? Even with a blank check, could we spend more than \$100 million or so extra in Vietnam over the next six months? Moreover, if such a really crash effort were feasible, it would probably be a sound investment in the long run. To let the counter-guerilla operations drag on over the years might well involve a far greater total cost to us than that involved in moving fast now. Of course, the gut question is feasibility; could South Vietnam absorb and utilize quickly enough another great infusion of funds? Could we actually get more GVN forces into the field? At least let's look into it.

Simultaneously, we must put the blocks to Diem on finally doing the necessary to regain popular support. Nolting concludes that he must undertake such measures within the next few months or face the prospect either of a military coup or a civil war. We must somehow impress Diem with a sufficient sense of crisis to move faster than he is.

Perhaps the above package would provide a lever for the President to personally impress on Diem that (1) latter is being caught up in a desperate crisis in which his very survival is at stake; (2) we are now prepared to pull out all the stops in providing anything necessary to meet this threat promptly and vigorously; but (3) the time has come when he too must undertake the massive and dynamic reform program without which the countryside cannot be won.

What do we lose if such an initiative fails? Are we any worse off than before? Our prestige may have become a little more heavily engaged but what else? And the risk involved if we fail to prevent the Viet Cong threat from developing into a full-fledged civil war is clearly overriding. After Laos, and with Berlin on the horizon, we cannot afford to go less than all-out in cleaning up South Vietnam.

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